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AUTHOR Powell, J. P.
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted at the University of New South Wales to assess informal staff-student contact. A questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 100 staff, and 57 responses were obtained. Most contact outside of class hours were connected with matters arising from teaching activities but a number of meetings were held simply on the basis of friendship. Matters relating to the university generally and situations involving counseling gave rise to far fewer meetings. Most of the staff had extremely limited contact with students in social settings unrelated to the teaching role. The most common arrangement for contact was talking immediately after a class. Although almost half of the respondents felt that the amount of contact between themselves and their students was inadequate, only a small number believed that informal relationships with students was of no importance in university life. Shyness on the part of students was seen as the biggest obstacle. The other major obstacle seen by staff is their own lack of time. Findings from other studies on staff-student contact are cited. (SW)

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INFORMAL STAFF-STUDENT CONTACT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF N.S.W.

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J.P. POWELL

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Tertiary Education Research Centre
University of New South Wales

Informal Staff-Student Contact at the University of New South Wales

It is a commonplace in theoretical writings about higher education that an essential element in the traditional idea of a university is that it comprises a community, a place where scholars and students live and work together sharing the common task of preserving and extending the stock of knowledge and understanding which our civilisation has built up over the centuries. It is widely held that, as far as the educational activities of universities are concerned, close personal relationships between staff and students play a major part in fostering the intellectual and social development of students and help to make the teaching activities of academics more satisfying and rewarding. It is also generally believed that as tertiary institutions have grown in size and demands upon the time of both staff and students have increased, the opportunities for the establishment of personal relationships outside of the formal teaching situation have steadily decreased.

The nature of the educational advantages which are supposed to result from close staff-student contact is rarely clearly spelt out and I do not intend to undertake that task here. Undoubtedly there can be disadvantages to staff arising from extra-curricular contacts with students, as Jowett sometimes found while he was Master of Balliol.

> It was one of his misfortunes that he was not a good rider, and yet used to ride a great deal. He was a little man, and he had a little pony; and everyone knows that a little man with a little pony is not likely to escape a great deal of playful criticism on the part of tall men who ride tall horses. Thus, it would sometimes happen that the Master and his pony would fall in with a party of riders returning from the hunt. The riders would trot at a quick pace behind the Master and his pony, and the latter, fretted by the noise behind it, would start off at a gallop, and thus place the Master in the awkward position of seeming to head a party of his own undergraduates on their return from the hunting field. (1)

Considering the importance attached to it by so many staff and students it is surprising that the topic has been so much neglected by research workers: we know very little about the extent and nature of staff-student contact or the reasons why it is felt to be of special significance. One of the earliest empirical studies was that carried out at Manchester University (2) in 1961 in which a random sample of 492 students completed a questionnaire dealing with informal staff-student

contact. One question asked "How often during last term did you take part in informal contacts?" The responses to this are set out in Table 1 and these show that nearly 30% reported only one or no contacts over a ten-week period. Other major findings were that all students attached great importance to informal academic and social contacts with staff, 80% felt that the amount of contact was inadequate; women had considerably less contact than men, staff paid more attention to the brighter students, the seniority of students made little difference to the frequency of contact.

A more recent study by Startup (3) reports a continuing high level of dissatisfaction with the amount of informal contact: over 40% of his respondents felt dissatisfied with the extent of the personal relationships which they were able to develop with their teachers. In another survey at the same university Startup (4) explored the views of staff on various aspects of their teaching and found that 55% were satisfied with the amount of individual contact with students, but when asked about informal contact the level of satisfaction fell to 45% and a further 4% expressed strong dissatisfaction.

In 1966 Mitchell (5) surveyed student opinion at a New Zealand university and found that although 80% felt that informal academic contact was a very necessary element in higher education only 12% felt the same way about informal social contacts. 80% agreed that there was not enough contact with staff out of class.

Pascarella and Terenzini (6) reviewed the scene in the United States and concluded that interaction outside of the classroom was both fairly infrequent and superficial in character. Thielens (7) found that less than half of the students at Columbia University claimed more than three contacts with staff throughout an entire year, and that of the senior students only half of them said that they knew one or more staff on a personal basis.

A recent major study by Wilson et al. (8) attempted to relate the views of staff and students on contact to the characteristics of successful teachers and their impact on the cognitive and affective development of students. Their work suggests that the amount of contact is related to the psychological accessibility of staff and that this is communicated to students through the teaching practices which they experience in the formal teaching situation.

Virtually nothing has been published on staff-student relations in Australian tertiary institutions. Magin (9) has reported some findings from a large-scale study of role definitions of university teachers given by staff and students in three science faculties. These showed that the interpersonal dimension (the lecturer as colleague and friend) received the least general support from both groups, but the dimension relating to the role of the teacher as an academic advisor who takes a personal interest in the welfare of students was considered to be very important by a majority of staff and students. However, when students were asked how frequently these desired behaviours actually occurred many claimed that they never or only rarely encountered them.

To sum up the findings which can be gleaned from the very scanty literature we can say that virtually all students favour contact with staff outside of the formal teaching situation and that a sizeable majority are not satisfied with the extent of the contact currently available in universities.

Our own study of staff opinions and practices was initiated by [illegible] as part of a wider survey at the University of N.S.W. designed to identify what staff saw as major obstacles to successful teaching. A random sample of 100 staff were asked to complete a questionnaire and replies were received from 57 of them. Some of the questions were based upon those used by Wilson (8).

Staff were asked how many times they had been in touch with students outside of class hours during the previous two weeks in each of six roles commonly adopted by teachers. The responses are given in Table 2. As might be expected, most of the meetings were connected with matters arising from teaching activities but a surprising number of meetings were held simply on the basis of friendship. The latter appears to be at variance with one of the findings reported by Magin. Matters relating to the university generally, and situations involving counselling, gave rise to far fewer meetings.

The next question sought information on the social character of informal encounters and the number of times these had taken place during the previous month. The results are given in Table 3. They show clearly that most of the staff had extremely limited contact with students in social settings unrelated to the teaching role.

Staff were then asked what arrangements they made to meet with students and their responses are given in Table 4. As might be expected by far the most common arrangement is that of being available to talk with students immediately after a class. The fact that 82% also claimed that they were always available whenever students wished to call on them must be treated with some caution: it is one thing to believe that one is permanently accessible but quite another to convince students that this is really the case, especially as they often complain of not being able to find staff when they seek them out. It is rather surprising that only 17% adopt the practice of placing a list on their door of the times when they will be available.

The next question asked how much contact there was thought to be within the university as a whole, within the respondent's own department, and between the respondent and his own students. The replies are set out in Table 5. It is clear from these that there is a considerable discrepancy between staff perceptions of the extent of their own contacts with students compared with their assessment of the activities of their colleagues. This discrepancy is even more striking in the responses made in reply to the question "How adequate is the present level of staff-student contact?" Half of the respondents felt satisfied with their own performance whereas only 7% believed that contact was adequate within the university as a whole. There is a possibility of bias, of course, in such a small sample in that there could be a tendency for those more concerned with staff-student relations to be more likely to complete the questionnaire.

Although almost half of the respondents felt that the amount of contact between themselves and their students was inadequate, only a small number believed that informal relationships with students was of no importance in university life. Opinions on the value of contact in relation to the seniority of students are presented in Table 7 which shows a big increase in the importance attached to contact when students are in their fourth or honours year. In response to a further question 40% agreed that out-of-class contact was an essential part of university education, 47% felt that it was of considerable importance but not essential, 7% believed that it was a useful adjunct, and only 3% claimed that it was of no particular importance.

Given that the great majority of staff consider informal contact to be valuable and the fact that half of the respondents were not satisfied

with their own relationships with students it would be of interest to know what staff see as the major obstacles in the way of improving the current situation. This information is contained in Table 8. Shyness on the part of students is seen as the biggest obstacle and there can be little doubt that many students are reluctant to approach staff because they feel incompetent to handle this kind of relationship. This is supported by recent Tibb studies of mature-age students: they are much more confident of their own social skills and tend to be far more active in seeking meetings with members of staff. One of the conclusions of the Wilson (8) study also indicates a close connection between "contact-seeking" and other student characteristics.

> High-interacting students, in general, seem to take a far more active role in their own education than do their peers. Not only are they more interested in pursuing their own intellectual interests, but they are more actively engaged in utilizing the existing resources and structures of their institutions and in changing them in directions that respond better to their needs (p. 165)

The other major obstacle seen by staff is lack of time on their own part, yet there seems to be an inconsistency between so many of them attaching so much importance to contact with students while finding themselves unable to allocate sufficient time to its realisation. Perhaps we need to look more closely at our priorities. If students are expected to spend most of each week attending formal classes and preparing assignments, and staff find themselves increasingly occupied with research, committees and administrative busy-work, it is scarcely surprising that so little time is available for the leisurely discussion of issues of common concern -- or even for becoming acquainted, at a personal level, with other members of the academic community. There is also a need to look much more closely at the teaching methods we use: it is an irony that although most staff favour closer personal relationships with students they continue to rely heavily upon the lecture, the most impersonal of teaching methods.

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(10) In addition to acknowledging the contribution of F. M. Katz in initiating and designing the survey on which this paper is based, I would also like to thank Eve Barrett and Christine Simmat for collating and processing the data.

Note: An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 47th ANZAAS Congress in Hobart in May 1978

TABLE 1

NUMBER OF CONTACTS REPORTED BY STUDENTS AT MANCHESTER

	0	1	2-5	6+	TOTAL
Men	12.1	13.5	26.4	50	349
Women	16.8	15.4	27.3	40.5	143
Total	13.4	14.0	25.2	47.1	492

TABLE 2

NUMBER OF OUT-OF-CLASS CONTACTS REPORTED BY STAFF DURING A FORTNIGHT

Role	None	1-2	3-4	5+
Educational adviser	44	33	7	16
Career adviser	49	47	3	2
Counsellor	68	23	3	5
Teacher: course matters	19	17	19	42
University member	71	16	3	2
Friend	54	14	14	17

TABLE 3

NATURE OF SOCIAL MEETINGS DURING PREVIOUS MONTH

Activity	Not at all	1-2	3-4	5+
Lunch or coffee	58	28	3	10
Sporting activities	91	3	2	3
Student meetings	61	26	9	3
Parties/social functions	63	32	5	-
Drink at pub or club	72	19	7	2
Entertained students at home	86	9	3	2

TABLE 4

ARRANGEMENTS MADE BY STAFF TO MEET STUDENTS

Arrangement	Yes	No
By appointment only	2	98
Allocate regular times to individuals	17	81
Available after class	89	9
Available whenever students want to come	82	17
List available times on door	17	82
Make special effort to see those who have not been to see me	25	75
Often see students in cafeteria, etc.	21	79
Inform of available time during vacations	67	33

TABLE 5

STAFF OPINION ON EXTENT OF CONTACT WITH STUDENTS

How much?	University	Department	Self
A great deal	-	14	13
A considerable amount	9	30	47
Not very much	46	26	28
Little	19	19	13
Practically none	9	2	-

TABLE 6

STAFF VIEWS ON THE ADEQUACY OF CONTACT

Adequacy	Yourself	University
Adequate	53	7
Barely adequate	40	46
Totally inadequate	7	26

TABLE 7

IMPORTANCE OF CONTACT BY LEVEL OF STUDENT

Importance	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4/Hons
Absolutely essential	23	16	22	53
Very important	30	38	31	26
Important	30	40	35	15
Not important	10	7	7	5

TABLE 8

OBSTACLES TO INCREASED STAFF-STUDENT CONTACT

Factor	Very much	Some extent	Not at all
Student reticence	44	46	5
Lack of staff interest	17	73	5
Lack of student interest	17	63	12
"Generation gap"	2	49	44
Student lack of time	21	53	21
Staff lack of time	35	51	12
Teacher as examiner	14	32	49